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ABSTRACT

The value of hearing, contemplating, and remembering the ancient tales of the Seneca Indians of upstate New York is the theme of this paper. Three of the legends, the Storytelling Stone, the Woman Who Fell from the Sky, and Naked Bear, are related by the author. They are considered for their mythic concerns and in terms of their value and relation to modern people living in upstate New York. (TJ)

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The People Who Were Here Before Speak to the People Here Now

I'm not from here, and my guess is many of you aren't, either. I've lived on Long Island, in Toronto, Rochester, Byron, and for the past five years in Geneseo. Bev Lewis, who is chairing this session, is from Missouri; Katherine Crabbe is from Oregon. My father is from Massachusetts. His father was from Ireland. I ask my students how many have lived in the same town all their lives? About two-thirds of the hands go up. How many live in the same town their parents grew up in? About half. Their grandparents? One or two.

Americans are restless. It's in our blood--it's how our ancestors got here in the first place. We sometimes think of it as a recent phemomenon, this perpetual motion, an aberration from the traditional stability of the old New England town or upstate New York town; but it's simply not true. A sizeable proportion of the population has always been on the move, our towns have always been growing or shrinking.

But there are some negative side-effects. One of the results of this motion is a sense in many people of "passing through." The place where we are is not the place where we were and possibly not the place where we will be tomorrow. So whose town is this? Not ours. Who will take responsibility for what becomes of it? Not we. Where are we?

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In a sense, nowhere--just passing through. Of course, there are plenty who stay in the small upstate towns, but I think many of them are haunted by the notion that the smartest, the most adventerous, the most creative leave for the city and make it where things are really happening: in New York or Boston or out on the coast. Those left behind find themselves responding to, complaining about, or cheering the cultural and social changes initiated in those great urban centers, but nothing is ever initiated here. Not here in Geneseo, Nunda, Alexander, or Batavia. That, at least, is what many of my small-town students feel.

Yet when Chaucer was alive, London was smaller than Batavia. Where is Batavia's Chaucer? Rochester's Shakespeare? And why does the question sound so ludicrous?

In 1973 I read John Gardner's Sunlight Dialogues and moved to Byron, six miles from Batavia. The Sunlight Dialogues is set in and around Batavia, where Gardner grew up, and it filled the little town with magic for me. The School for the Blind, the fire house, the Thruway exit, the jail, policemen, pedestrians, storekeepers were all transformed for me by Gardner's vision and the Sunlight Man's magic into luminous places and people at the very heart of reality. Batavia was no longer a cultural backwater or a slightly shabby satellite of Rochester and Buffalo, but a magical center where anything could happen, where any farmboy could grow up to be John Gardner.

The experience inspired me to make up a course called the Literature of Upstate New York. Its purpose was to give my students that

sense of the wonder of where they are, of the magic dormant all around them, the sense of not being on anyone's circumference, but at the very center. If it can't happen here, it can't happen anywhere.

It was in this context that I first read Seneca legends. This was their home. The sense of place and wonder and responsibility I was trying to teach my students was simply a given in their world. They knew the woods were full of magic, the hills, lakes, and rivers teeming with spirits. This whole area was the center of that astonishing empire controlled by the Iroquois Confederacy. By the 1700s the Senecas and the other four tribes who made up what they called the "Longhouse" controlled most of the territory and tribes from New York south to Kentucky, west to Michigan, north to Ontario. The Longhouse itself, home, was upstate New York. We are meeting today at the western door of the Longhouse. The Senecas were the keepers of the western door.

In Seneca stories, western New York is the center of the universe. Their Garden of Eden and Golden World were not in the Fertile Crescent or at the plains of Arcadia, but in the Finger Lakes and the Genesee Valley. Their civilization and ideas of government were not imported from Europe, but home grown, rooted in this soil we walk on and lay our roads across. What they knew of nature they learned from these same summers and winters we know and from the four legged brothers they shared the woods with.

Seneca mythology is a startling revelation to my students, who have little sense that such things could have been conceived here. Seneca legends and stories help give them a more vivid sense of where

they are and what this place meant to those who were here before them, and, I hope, a greater concern about what will happen here when we are gone.

But beyond all this, the stories of the Seneca are simply good stories: they are an excellent introduction to literature and fiction; they give students a perspective on their own culture and assumptions; and they have a wisdom which belies their surface simplicity. I will talk about three stories to show what I mean.

The legend of the Storytelling Stone tells about the origin of stories and the value the Senecas placed on them. The hero is an orphan boy named Poyeshao. One day his foster mother says, "It is time for you to learn to hunt. Tomorrow morning go to the woods and kill all the birds you can find." Poyeshao goes out the first day and has great luck. On each of the next eight days he is still more successful, until his foster mother is tying birds in bundles and distributing them to the neighbors. "Now you have begun to help me get food," she tells him. Then on the tenth day the boy sits on a high, smooth, flat-topped, round stone to repair the feather on his arrow. He hears a voice ask, "Shall I tell you stories?" He looks around for the speaker, but sees no one. "Shall I tell you stories?" he hears again. He looks around, but there is no one. A third time he hears, "Shall I tell you stories?" and he realizes then it is the Stone. "What is that?" he asks the Stone. "What does it mean to tell stories?"

"It is telling what happened a long time ago. If you will give me your birds, I'll tell you stories."

"You may have the birds."

All day the boy sits and listens to the stories. That night he kills a few birds on the way home and gives them to his foster mother. The next day he heads

straight for the Stone, killing a few birds on the way, and bringing home only four or five after his day listening to the stories. His foster mother, becoming suspicious, hires a boy to follow him the next day, but the spy is soon sitting beside Poyeshao listening to the Stone, too. Several days later the foster mother sends out two men to follow the ~~the~~ two boys. The men watch from the woods as the boys jump on the Stone and listen to it. Their curiosity gets the best of them, and soon the two men are on the Stone too, listening to the stories. The Stone instructs the boys and men to bring everyone in the village the next day. Each one should bring some food to leave for the Stone. The next day the whole village is there. Each puts bread or meat on the Stone, and everyone sits on the ground around it. When all are quiet, the Stone begins.

"Now I will tell you stories of what happened long ago. There was a world before this. The things I am going to tell about happened in that world. Some of you will remember every word that I say, some will remember a part of the words, and some will forget them all -- I think this will be the way, but each man must do the best he can. Hereafter you must tell these stories to one another -- Now listen."

It takes three days for the Stone to finish its stories. Each morning when the people return, the food they put on the Stone the day before is gone. Later in the afternoon of the third day the Stone tells them, "I have finished! You must keep these stories as long as the world lasts; tell them to your children and grandchildren generation after generation. One person will remember them better than another. When you go to a man or a woman to ask for one of these stories always carry something to pay for it, bread or meat, or whatever you have.

I know all that happened in the world before this; I have told it to you. When you visit one another, you must tell these things, and keep them up always. I have finished." The legend continues, "And so it has been. From the Stone came all the knowledge the Senecas have of the world before this."

It's a wonderful story. The Senecas, remember, were a hard-nosed, practical people who spent most of their lives coaxing enough food out of the ground or rivers or woods to stave off starvation. Yet it was their custom to give up a portion of their meat and bread to someone who was a good storyteller. This story explains how that custom started, and shows us incidentally a kind of prototype for the National Endowments for the Humanities and the Arts. Artists have always been beggars, exempted from practical work, trading a vision for a piece of bread.

But beyond this, the story helps explain the significance of myths. It is no accidental detail, I think, that the boy who discovers the Stone is a child without parents. For the Senecas themselves, as they are depicted in this world before stories, are a people who know nothing about the world before this. The orphan boy symbolizes this people without a past, without an identity. Part of knowing who they are and where they are going as a people is knowing where they came from. That knowledge of context, significance, origin, is what the Stone gives the Senecas. Think of the stories every American grows up with -- George Washington's cherry tree, Abe Lincoln's barefoot return of a borrowed book, the Pilgrims' thanksgiving with the Indians. The historical truth or falsehood of these stories is less important than what they tell us about the qualities we value as Americans.

One of the stories the Senecas attributed to the Storytelling Stone was that of the Woman Who Fell from the Sky, the story of the creation of this world. This

is a story told in different versions by many tribes -- the sky chief's daughter falls through a hole in the sky, is caught by the waterfowl, and comes to rest on the back of a turtle floating in an endless primordial sea. A toad dives to the bottom and brings up soil which magically increases on the back of the turtle and becomes the substance of our world, what Gary Snyder in a recent book of poetry calls "Turtle Island." She has a daughter and that daughter has two ~~two~~ sons, Flint and Sapling, who hate one another. These two, knowing that the people are coming soon, form our world out of the raw materials at hand.

Flint is the malevolent creator. He makes his portion of the world all rocky and full of ledges. He makes a mosquito so large it can knock over trees. Sapling, on the other hand, wants to make the world easy for the people who are about to come. He creates animals so fat they can hardly move, maple trees that drip sweet syrup, and rivers so formed that half the water flows upstream and half the water flows downstream. His world is the Seneca's Eden -- not a Middle Eastern Garden with mysterious trees, but a New York State woodland filled with sycamores and maples.

Each brother disapproves of what the other has made, and so each modifies the work of the other. Thus the world the Senecas lived in is a compromise, a mixture of good and bad. Yes, there are mosquitoes, but at least they can't run you through. Bears and deer and turkeys are good to eat, but they are fast and wiley and hard to catch. The maples drip syrup, but it takes much boiling to get it. And rivers provide only a one way trip.

The Eden story of the Judeo-Christian tradition contains, of course, the story of the fall, the original sin which broke the world. Evil and pain and death and work we learn are pretty much our own fault, punishment for a primal sin. We are

born guilty. The Senecas had no such sense of guilt. The world was broken long before they got here. In fact, it might have been much worse than it is. They recognized trouble and pleasure, strawberries and blizzards, as a compromise for which they were not responsible. Suffering is not punishment -- it is simply how things are sometimes.

In studying this and other stories of creation, scientific or mythical or religious, students recognize the extent to which attitudes and behavior, their own included, are determined by explanations of our origin. The twentieth century's vision of creation as the result of mindless, impersonal forces in haphazard collision is mirrored in a society which is itself increasingly impersonal, and in a history of unparalleled destructive brutality.

Of course, the Senecas knew all about brutality, too. They were often accused of it. Inflicting pain was just as much a part of their culture as being willing to endure it was. But they were also wise in the ways of peace and aware of how difficult it is to transform a society which defines itself by war and valor into one which defines itself by peaceful cooperation with those who were once enemies. Jesse Cornplanter of the Tonowanda Reservation, a descendant of the famous Corn Planter of the Revolutionary War, tells a story which illustrates this in his Legends of the Longhouse.

The story of Nyah-gwa-ih-heh-go-wah, the Naked Bear, is set in the time before the confederacy, when all the Iroquois tribes were locked in an endless cycle of warfare with one another, every death in one village requiring, by a code of honor, vengeance on the killers, who in their turn were required in honor to avenge the vengeance. So it went, in an endless bloody circle. There could be no end to war, given their concepts of honor, courage, and justice. Historians believe such a state of universal warfare did indeed exist until someone -- the Iroquois say it was Degandawida and his spokesman Hiawatha -- preached the astonishing, and

at first unpopular, message of brotherhood and peace. At any rate, in this story it is an unnamed chief in an unnamed village who has the strange idea that peace would be better than war. He sends two runners to the next village, with which his own has been at war for as long as anyone can remember. The runners go, transforming themselves into a wolf and an owl, reassuming their human shapes when they reach the enemy village. There they explain their mission to the enemy chiefs, who, after a long council, agree that the idea is a good one. In four days' time the people of both villages meet in the woods half-way between.

> It was such times that it was never known before, where everyone was happy with no thought of danger. Such were their joy to be freed from this constant fear of the enemy that may strike at any place and time, that they had the pleasure of staying out evenings, singing, laughing, and shouting. . . . They all wondered at the new form of life in their village. . .
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> . . . It was an unusual sight to see campfires in all directions as each family chose certain spots to camp for the night. There was much laughter and singing as the older men gathered some camps and started to sing their different ceremonial dance songs, until quite late at night when they all retired; then everything was quiet, not even a guard to watch over them but the twinkling stars above and a few night birds.

The next day both groups meet in the middle of a field, burying their war clubs, taking their new brothers and sisters by the hand, and dancing. Then the first chief makes a speech:

> Brothers, relatives, and friends, today at this place in this pit we cast all weapons of warfare. With it we bury all hatred, all sorrows for the relatives who are gone ahead of us, who may be looking at us now, -- we mourn for them silently. We find that we are all related as one family, and as such we shall stand hereafter. . . . We now bury all weapons, never to dig it up again. All we keep is what we need to hunt with. Let no one mention about the past. We all have lost someone; so let us not bring back the things that hurt us; those that are gone will not come back.

The people of both villages go home rejoicing, amazed at the new world they live in, euphoric with sensations, previously unknown, of security and freedom from fear.

If the story ended here it would be a wonderful account of the transition from a war culture to a peace culture; of the necessity of acknowledging the past and honoring its dead but turning from them, too, to break the cycle which trapped them; and of the miraculous and perhaps unnatural notion of peace and the gifts it brings. But the story is only half over, for it concerns itself not only with the difficulty of conceiving of and making peace, but with the even harder task of keeping it. The concept of peace may be a divine or magic gift, but making peace work requires purely human toil. It is the difference between Sadat's startling first visit to Begin and the hard, frustrating work that has gone on since.

The story goes on to tell of how several groups of young people leave to visit the other village. Their anxious relatives wait for their return with increasing uneasiness. Weeks pass. None of the young people come back. The anguished chief finally calls a council and admits that now he fears that his so-called brothers have deceived him. The war chiefs call for war, but the chief insists first on finding out for certain what has happened. He asks for a volunteer to go on the dangerous mission to the other village, but none of the young warriors will take the wampum belt which is the token of accepting the challenge. Then a shy and slight young man enters the longhouse. He has always been the butt of the warriors' jokes, a timid boy who never plays sports and who lives with his grandmother. "Why not try this brave man?" the warriors sneer. "He will no doubt do it."

He volunteers. As he accepts the wampum belt the chief commands his cowardly warriors to respect this man they have always mocked before.

The next morning the young man makes his farewells and runs off into the forest toward the other village. He disappears from sight in the woods. After a time he finds piles of human bones on the trail between the two villages. He sees as many bones from the other village as he does from his own, and he realizes then that the other village is suffering the same fate as his own and must have the same bitter feelings of betrayal. There is a common enemy, then, some enormous monster who is feeding on them and deliberately creating suspicion and enmity. That night the monster talks to him in a dream, revealing himself as Nyah-gwa-ih-heh-go-wah, the Naked Bear. The bear knows he has met his match in the fearless young man; he gives him his tooth as a token of peace and friendship and flees the country forever. The young man returns in triumph and shows the people the tooth which had been eating them. The chief declares the young man his successor, and peace is restored with the other village.

The story of the Naked Bear reveals the rather sophisticated concept of peace as a condition which contains its own special perils, and which requires a new kind of heroism, a new kind of hero. The enemies of peace are not necssarily our old adversaries in the other village (as the valient war chiefs think), but suspicions and hostilities lurking within ourselves as well as in them. A common malevolence gnaws at us both, but the old warrior-hero cannot see that. It is the quiet man rejected by the rough and tumble braves who has the vision and the courage to break through the old, simple-minded suspicions, and defeat that common enemy no one else even suspected. The new hero is not handsome General Westmoreland, but plump and bespeckled Henry Kissinger. He carries not a weapon, but a briefcase. Perhaps today a drawling peanut farmer can reconcile two nations who have distrusted each other since the days of the Pharoas. What is eating them? Who will bring back the tooth of the Naked Bear?

Like the narratives of the Bible, the stories of the Senecas have a deceptively spare and simple surface; but there is nothing simple about their articulation of the value of art, of the radical ambivalence of the universe, or of the complex forces at work in individuals and their societies. These are the creative visions of western New York, of Geneseo, of Canandaigua, of Nunda, of Irondequoit and Tonowanda and Conesus. And if we do not tell these stories, who will? The words of the Storytelling Stone have a special poignance and urgency when the longhouse is a classroom and the listeners know nothing about the people who were here before:

> Now I will tell you stories of what happened long ago. There was a world before this. The things I am going to tell about happened in that world. You must keep these stories as long as the world lasts; tell them to your children and grandchildren generation after generation. When you visit one another you must tell these things, and keep them up always. I have finished.